



Controlling the Burn

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

Wildfires are always a concern in rural Texas, but these days, fire threatens life and property throughout our state. While weather-related fires are largely out of our control, there is much that individuals can do to protect themselves, their neighbors and the Texas landscape.

We have just endured the most damaging and prolific wildfire season in Texas history, and more fire-related deaths have been reported this year than any other on record: between January 2005 and September 2006, 19 Texans died in a record 31,000 wildfires that burned upwards of 700 homes and 2.2 million acres.

Fires in these last 18 months have cost property owners some \$628 million in damage. The burden of containment usually falls on local firefighters backed by state crews, but recently we've needed outside help. Last year, nearly 4,000 firefighting personnel and 500 pieces of equipment from all 50 states were called on for assistance.

Our situation is so dramatic that The Weather Channel sent a TV crew to Texas last April to document the wildfire epidemic for its program, "Storm Stories: The Worst of Nature—The Best of Man."

The TV crew arrived a month after a wildfire packing 50-foot flames claimed 11 lives and burned an estimated 850,000 acres in the Texas Panhandle. The blaze ignited when electrical lines snapped in wind gusts of 50-60 mph.

Our increasing state population is a central focus as the incidence of wildfires increases. New housing subdivisions are being developed right next to rural grasslands, and we're using larger areas of fire-prone vegetation, which further contributes to the problem.

For example, residents of Cross Plains last year found themselves in the path of a massive wildfire. The source of the blaze is undetermined, but investigators did establish that it began on the "roadside."

The Texas Forest Service (TFS) at Texas A&M University has identified more than 14,500 communities, in every area of the state, that are at risk for wildfire damage. In fact, 85 percent of wildfires occur less than two miles from a community.

But the primary reason for the increased incidence of wildfires is likely due to changing weather patterns, and Texas A&M researchers say we're well into a drought that could potentially last two to three decades.

Several years ago, analyzing weather data from the last 100 years, the Forest Service identified a distinctive cycle of wet and dry periods, each lasting some 25-30 years. Three separate drought periods of this duration occurred, with the last ending in the late 1970s.

Then a relatively wet period followed. We entered the current drought period in 1996, and we can expect it to last at least 15 more years, the A&M research indicates. Even with rain, we can expect sustained increases in the number and severity of wildfires over that period.

Public resources devoted to firefighting have not kept up with the increasing threat. State and local authorities need more manpower and more equipment. Forestry authorities will be seeking additional funding in the next state legislative session.

"By making a moderate investment up front—instead of after Texas starts burning—to reduce the factors which cause wildfires, the lives and properties of Texans can be protected and saved from catastrophic loss," says James B. Hull, who doubles as State Forester and director of the TFS.

Individuals play a major role. Remember "Only you can prevent forest fires"? It's not that different with wildfires in Texas. The Forest Service recommends:

- Watch for burn bans in your county. Updated lists may be found at the Texas Wildfire Information page found at the website <http://tfsnews.tamu.edu>;
- Don't throw cigarettes out of your car windows;
- Avoid parking or driving where dry grass and weeds can come into contact with the hot pollution control equipment under your vehicle;
- Before burning household trash, brush piles or other debris, establish firebreaks down to bare soil around the intended fire site, including burn barrels; and
- Keep fires small and extinguish them cold to the touch before leaving them unattended.

Experts say that with care, and proper planning, some 90 percent of wildfires can be prevented. We should all do our part to protect the beauty, the property and—most importantly—the lives of those in our great state.

Sen. Cornyn is a member of the following Senate Committees: Armed Services, Judiciary, Budget, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Joint Economic. He is the chairman of the subcommittees on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship and Emerging Threats and Capabilities. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge.

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